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SUBJECT: KENYA ELECTIONS: WOMEN CANDIDATES INTIMIDATED
BUT NOT DEFEATED

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: In the last two months, at least six women candidates for local office and Parliamentary seats have been physically attacked in attempts to intimidate them into dropping out of the race. On October 7, Asha Ali became the latest victim of such an attack. Ali, who is running for a civic council seat in the Nairobi suburb of Dandora, is still struggling to recover from the brutal beating she received, a beating that she believes was ordered by her MP in an attempt to silence her and shut down her campaign. Post continues to be outspoken in supporting Ali and other victims and to urge the GOK to prevent election-related violence and to investigate and punish those responsible for it. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Asha Ali, a single mother of five, lives in Dandora estate, notorious as one of Nairobi's roughest neighborhoods. Home to the largest dump in Nairobi, it is listed as one of the most polluted places in the world and boasts a crime rate that is exceptionally high even by Nairobi standards. Ali, who works for a local NGO, decided to run for a seat on the local civic council to address the problems of poverty, crime, and unemployment that plague her community and that fall particularly heavily on women and children. On October 7, Ali became the latest in a series of women candidates who have been violently attacked in an effort to persuade them not to run for office (SEE REF a).

¶3. (SBU) Ali's eyes filled with tears as she recounted the brutal beating and humiliation inflicted on her by three armed men in front of her house. Thinking at first that the attack was a simple robbery, Ali handed over her valuables. When the beating continued in full view of her children and her elderly mother, Ali pleaded with her attackers to stop. "They told me not to stand for office in this constituency, and to go where 'my people' are in Kibera slum," said Ali. Beating her with sticks, kicking her, brandishing machetes and in AK-47, and finally threatening her with rape, her attackers made clear that, if she continues her political campaign, her life is in danger. When Poloff visited her in the hospital several days after the attack, Ali was still struggling with the resulting physical and emotional trauma, as well as the mounting medical bills. However, she vowed to continue her candidacy.

¶4. (SBU) Ali is an ethnic Kikuyu living in a Kikuyu-dominated area, but as a convert to Islam with a Muslim name, was assumed by her attackers to be "Nubian" and thus a minority in her neighbourhood. (Note: Nairobi's sprawling Kibera slum, home to some one million people, originated as a settlement for Muslim Nubian World War I

veterans. Today, their descendants own much of the property in Kibera and rent it, often illegally, to poor tenants from other ethnic groups. Kibera has been the site of bitter, often violent, conflict over the legality of slum dwellings and the Kikuyu-dominated government's preferential treatment of Kikuyu. End note.) Ethnicity is only one element of the attack, however. In standing for civic council without "permission" from area MP David Mwenje, Ali has challenged a man known for resorting to violence in order to stay in power. Ali is known in Dandora as an activist for women's rights. She has taken rape victims for medical treatment, encouraged women to leave abusive relationships, and supported girls in their efforts to finish secondary school.

MP BEHIND THE ATTACK, VICTIM ALLEGES

15. (SBU) Ali and Mwenje, her MP, are both ethnic Kikuyu, members of the pro-Kibaki NARC-Kenya party, and supporters of Kibaki's re-election campaign. However, despite these superficial similarities, Ali claims Mwenje ordered the attack on her in order to punish her for daring to run for a civic council seat against the (male) candidate Mwenje supports. Ali also claims that Mwenje put the fix on the recent election for the divisional leader of Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO), a national NGO focused on women's rights and gender equity issues, by ensuring that voters from outside the constituency supported his preferred candidate and not Ali who also ran for the position. The holder of this position is considered to be very influential among women voters.

16. (SBU) Mwenje, currently serving as an Assistant

NAIROBI 00004232 002 OF 002

Minister in the Ministry of Cooperative Development and Marketing, has been the MP for Embakasi constituency since 1983. A man with a big ego and unpredictable temper, Mwenje presides over a constituency with the largest number of registered voters in Nairobi a fact that his critics attribute to his ability to import additional Kikuyu voters from neighbouring districts. In 2003, Mwenje shocked colleagues when he publicly confessed to having used Jeshi la Embakasi, a banned violent youth group akin to the notorious Mungiki gang, to intimidate his political enemies. Use of such vigilante groups by senior politicians was common under former President Daniel arap Moi's regime, but has waned following the election of President Kibaki in December 2002. Mwenje is also known for getting into a physical altercation with fellow MP in Parliament in 2001, which culminated in the other MP biting Mwenje in the back. Although Mwenje claims his violent tactics are a thing of the past, many observers in the constituency, including Ali, believe that he is up to his old tricks and will continue resorting to violence during the upcoming elections.

17. (SBU) Unfortunately, violence against women candidates in both Parliamentary and local government races is on the rise in the last few months. The brutal September attack against Parliamentary candidate Flora Tera, who has organized a "Tera Against Terror" campaign to bring attention to the issue of violence against women candidates, was the most publicized but by no means the only such attack (ref A). The Ambassador visited Tera in the hospital and brought extensive media attention to the issue, calling for swift and appropriate government action to prevent future attacks. The UNIFEM-supported Gender and Governance Programme in Kenya estimates that at least six women candidates have been physically attacked in the last two months. Women candidates have huge hurdles to overcome in terms of cultural bias and securing campaign financing; violence and intimidation add another barrier to meaningful participation of women

in the Kenyan electoral process (see ref B). The recently launched Gender Rapid Response Unit (GRRU), supported by UNIDFEM and other donors, will provide another mechanism for women candidates to seek counselling, legal services and advocacy. The GRRU is committed to working with the Kenyan Police, the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) and the media to combat gender based political violence. Post will continue to closely monitor the situation, to publicly support victims, and to pressure the GOK to ensure that women candidates can run for office without fear. We are identifying key constituencies in which women are viable candidates and will follow these races particularly closely. We are working closely with non-governmental groups involved in supporting women's rights.

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